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ABSTRACT

Based on information from the School Transition Study, sponsored by the MacArthur Network on Successful Pathways through Middle Childhood, this Early Childhood Digest focuses on enhancing communication between parents and the school. The digest discusses the importance of parents' level of comfort at school and in talking to teachers, and provides examples for ways parents have become more comfortable and confident. Also described are ways parents can communicate with the school without visiting the school. The digest discusses difficulties in communication when parents speak languages different from that of the teachers, have different backgrounds, or have lived in the United States for only a short time, and provides suggestions for improving communication in these situations. The digest notes the importance of parents from backgrounds different from that of the teacher sharing their views with school in order to help the teacher understand their child. The digest concludes by noting that teachers need to know about the child's life outside of school in order to do their job better and that parents need to find a way to communicate with their child's teacher what is right for them. (KB)

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Helping Parents Communicate Better with Schools

Early Childhood Digest

May 1999

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National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education

Early Childhood Digest:

Helping Parents Communicate Better with Schools

May 1999

This Early Childhood Digest is based on information from the School Transition Study, sponsored by the MacArthur Network on Successful Pathways through Middle Childhood and conducted, in part, by the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP).

Good communication between parents and teachers has many benefits. When parents and teachers share information, children learn more and parents and teachers feel more supported. Good communication can help create positive feelings between teachers and parents.

Schools and teachers know that good communication with parents is an important part of their job. Teachers need to know about the children's families, language, and culture in order to help children learn. Parents benefit because they learn more about what goes on in school and can encourage learning at home. Most importantly, children benefit by improved communication because contact between home and school helps children learn and succeed.

But parent-teacher communication can also be hard, especially when parents feel uncomfortable in school, don't speak English well, or come from different cultural backgrounds than teachers. Fortunately, both parents and teachers have developed ways to make communication easier. In addition to parent-teacher conferences or other meetings in the schools, parents and family members in the School Transition Study discovered creative ways to gather and share information with teachers and to feel more comfortable doing so.

Communicate and be comfortable in the school

In our research, we found that communication is hard when parents do not feel comfortable in the school or talking to teachers. Some parents might have had a bad experience in school when they were children. Other parents have not felt welcomed by the school or teacher. Fortunately, there are things you can do to help overcome these barriers. Here are examples of how some parents have become more comfortable and confident. But, remember, parents and teachers should check with each other first to make sure they both feel comfortable with these arrangements:

- *Chat with the teacher.* One father just stops by and chats with his daughter's teacher when he picks his daughter up from school. Through these talks they have come to know each other and that can make it easier when it is time to have a parent-teacher conference.
- *Join in an activity or program for parents at the school.* Some parents help a science class by doing gardening and helping children see how plants grow. Some parents attend a parent group at school to learn how to help their children learn at home. When parents do these kinds of things, it is a way of telling the teacher and the child that the parent cares a lot about the child's education and the school.
- *Talk to other people who spend time in the school.* One parent knows the school nurse and is able to talk comfortably to her. This parent is able to learn more about the school by talking with other parents or neighbors who know the school and can provide information.
- *Spend time watching your child in the school.* One mother regularly sits in her son's classroom at the beginning of the day for a few minutes when she drops him off. She gets the feel of the classroom and sees how he acts with his friends and his teacher.

Communicate from outside the school

Our research also found that it can be hard for a parent to communicate with a teacher when the parent cannot get to the school. Sometimes parents do not have a car or someone to watch their other children while they visit the school. Other times, parents work during the day or evening and cannot get to a meeting. But communication can happen even without a visit to the school.

- *Have other family or friends visit the school.* One mother has been home sick, so her father walks his young granddaughter to school each morning. He sometimes talks to the teacher or takes home written materials and tells the mother what he has observed in the classroom. In all these ways, he passes along information from the girl's teacher to her mother.
- *Talk on the phone with the teacher.* One mother works full time, but is able to take calls at her job. She gave her work number to her child's teacher. When the child has a problem in class, the teacher

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can call the mother so they can work on a solution to the problem together. Sometimes the mother will give advice to the child over the phone.

- *Write a little note.* A mother who works a swing shift job has a hard time coming into school during school hours. Sometimes she asks her older daughter who goes to the school to deliver a note to her young son's teacher, to tell the teacher about a doctor's appointment or other news.

Communicate even when there are different languages

Some of the parents in our study do not speak the same language as teachers, come from different backgrounds, or have not lived in the United States for very long. These things can sometimes make communication hard.

- *Spend time in the school.* One mother speaks Spanish and her child's teacher does not. The mother feels good being in the school, but she felt uncomfortable working in the classroom. So she helps with school events by doing things like decorating the school. Helping out in the school lets everyone see that she cares about her child and the school, and she stays involved and knows what is going on.

- *Find someone who speaks your language.* Some parents find someone in the school who speaks their language. Often it is the principal or a teacher's aide. They can listen to parents' concerns or translate during parent-teacher conferences. Another way is to bring a friend or family member to school to translate, or ask the school to help find a translator.

- *Ask about language classes at the school.* Sometimes schools can help parents learn the new language. One parent took English as a Second Language (ESL) lessons right in her child's school, which made it easier for her to talk to the teacher.

- *Volunteer at home.* Sometimes you can help with a class project at home. Teachers will appreciate your involvement and your children will see that you care about their school.

Communicate even when there are different cultures and backgrounds

Even when parents and teachers speak the same language, they may come from very different backgrounds and have different beliefs and traditions. One African-American mother feels differently from the teacher about the importance of music and dance as a part of her daughter's education. It is important to share your views with your children's school.

Many teachers want more information about a child's family, the family's beliefs, and what happens in the child's life outside of school to help them understand the child better. But some teachers are afraid to ask families about this, or feel too busy. Some teachers may end up guessing about what is happening with the child outside of school.

- *Share your beliefs and values if you feel comfortable.* One mother feels that children should not be sent on to the next grade if they are struggling with learning. She explains that in her country, children are not promoted until they are ready. When her own children had difficulty learning, this mother found out about the school's policy about promoting children to the next grade, and made sure to share her own beliefs with the teacher and principal. The school respected her wishes.

Choose the way that's right for you

In addition to attending parent-teacher conferences, parents can visit the school, chat after school or by phone, or ask another person to pass along information. There are many different ways for parents to communicate with teachers about children's learning. It's important to find the way that's right for you.

The role of teachers and schools in communication

To do their job better, teachers need to know about the child's life outside of school. Some teachers schedule conferences that fit in with parents' work hours. Offering child care or transportation when possible would also make it easier for parents to come to the school. Schools that greet visitors warmly or open a parent center make some parents feel more comfortable and welcome in the school.

Some teachers call parents at home. Some teachers also write notes to parents, or send home information about the child with other family members. Finally, some teachers and schools provide translators and celebrate the diverse cultural backgrounds of children and their families.

Teachers and schools can do many things to make communication with families easier. It's important to tell your child's teacher the ways of communicating that work best for you.

This Digest was prepared by Holly Kreider, Ellen Mayer, and Peggy Vaughan of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). For more papers on this study, please call HFRP at (617) 496-4304, write to them at 38 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, or visit their Web site at http://hugse1.harvard.edu/~hfrp.

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